

TRAVEL WEEKLY

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CHINA

Suzhou's gardens, culture paint pretty picture



The Gate to the East dominates the skyline from Jinji Lake. Suzhou's gardens, workshops and rich cultural history make for a rewarding destination.

By Nadine Godwin

Walking through a top-drawer Chinese garden is like walking into a painting. No, a series of paintings.

And that's the idea. I walked into those "paintings" in Suzhou while accompanying travel agents on a fun hosted by the city's tourism bureau.

Suzhou, a 2,500-year-old city near Shanghai, boasts nine Unesco-protected gardens. We visited the 500-year-old Humble Administrator's Garden, the largest of the lot at 12.4 acres. It also abuts the modern Suzhou Museum (2006), designed by I.M. Pei, whose forebears hailed from Suzhou. Pei's design was inspired by the gardens.

The oldest of Suzhou's gardens dates from the 11th century, but most originated during the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties, when Suzhou was China's commercial and cultural capital. Fifty of about 200 gardens survive.

China's historical gardens were private, and owners' homes were part of their landscape. Such gardens incorporate water, rocks, trees and lotus blooms in ways meant to create miniature versions of nature's lakes, mountains and forests. The gardens couple these natural elements with the man-made—pavilions, teahouses, bridges, pathways and walls—to create serene envi-

ronments shielded from worldly bustle.

A Chinese garden may appear unstructured, but the features are consciously arranged to create a series of scenes, viewed in succession, that resemble artwork. In the background, the surrounding walls are painted white to suggest the rice paper used by painters.

At the Humble Administrator's Garden, one pavilion was built to accommodate opera audiences who watched performers across a pond. The gardens, built for contemplation and leisure, offer opportunities for tourists to have this or other unique experiences, too. By arrangement through local operators, those experiences could include dinners, musical performances, tai chi sessions and the like.

The tourism bureau hosted 45 U.S. travel agents and operators as part of a larger project to increase the number of Americans making overnight visits.

Suzhou could be seen in a fly-by daytrip from Shanghai; however, because of its history and geography, Suzhou offers a rich cross section of markers for the Chinese culture, justifying a longer stay.

For select special-interest groups, the gardens alone could fill a day or more. Sessions devoted to bonsai and flower arranging would round out that itinerary.

Here are some other ways the Suzhou story morphs into tourism

experiences:

• Suzhou is called the Silk Capital of the World. Silk production predates just about everything in the area, and silk embroidery has a 2,000-year history here.

Our tour of the city's No. 1 Silk Factory included a de rigueur session devoted to the silkworm, silk threads and silk weaving, followed by a very rewarding shopping opportunity.

There are other ways to consider silk, such as at the Suzhou Silk Museum and the Suzhou Embroidery Art Museum, displaying preserved fabrics or examples of the embroidery. In one variation, double-sided embroidery offers an image for display on each side, and sometimes the two images are different. And, yes, visitors can buy silk embroidery or even commission custom



Suzhou's gardens, most dating to the Ming and Qing dynasties, incorporate natural and man-made elements to create different scenes akin to works of art.

jobs with advance notice.

• Kunqu opera originated in Suzhou during the Ming dynasty and is considered the ancestor to all Chinese opera. Our itinerary included scenes from a popular production presented to our trade group at the Kunqu Opera Museum. We were invited to watch performers prepare their makeup and costumes, as well.

Agents can arrange for their groups to duplicate our experience. Failing that, there are regularly scheduled Kunqu performances at the museum, seasonally at the Unesco-protected Master of the Nets Garden and at select Suzhou teahouses.

• Suzhou is called Venice of the East: 42.5% of the city is water. That water includes parts of the Yangtze River and the Grand Canal, scores of local canals, the ancient city's most and numerous lakes. Suzhou's 3,276-square-mile jurisdiction embraces several small "water towns," known for their canals and for a certain authenticity that appeals to tourists.

Our group took the watery route through one such town, the thousand-year-old Tongli. Our touring vessels took six passengers each, but there were boats and boatmen aptly ready to accommodate all of us. Tongli's willow-shaded canals parallel strings of outdoor eateries plus houses that double as shops. Our canal cruise passed under many of the village's 47 bridges.

Sightseeing from the water is almost imperative in a place like Suzhou. Vendors offer boat rides of all kinds: on local canals, the Grand Canal and Yangtze River; on Suzhou's most, which circumnavigates Old Town (though the walls are mostly gone); and on the in-town Jinji Lake, with its views of an evolving modern skyline.

• The skyline is epitomized by the new Suzhou Industrial Park (SIP), launched in 1994. The SIP features low-rise and exotic high-rise buildings, some of Suzhou's newest five-star hotels plus resorts and entertainment areas.

The SIP's tallest building, the 990-foot Gate to the East, is this ancient city's newest symbol.

For more on Suzhou, visit www.traveltosuzhou.com.

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